

Marcello Tari and Matt Peterson

“There Is No Unhappy Love”: The Communism of Destitution

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Editor’s note: The text below is excerpted from Marcello Tari’s book There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution, translated by Richard Braude and published by Common Notions earlier this year. It is followed by an interview with Tari conducted by Matt Peterson.

Everywhere, therefore, where my reflection wants to comprehend love, I see only contradiction.

– Søren Kierkegaard, “In vino veritas,” 1845¹

The gateway to the transformation of self and world doesn’t lie in the reform of the state or in its technological acceleration. It is not to be found in “collectivization” or in the affirmation of will. All of these means merely erect screens between the truth and the reality of existence so as to never let them meet. They are exteriorities with their own ends, connected to each other in a space and time from which we are separated by a thousand screens. For this reason, during any revolt, the first reflex is to destroy these screens, perhaps symbolically, but nevertheless in the greatest number possible. One does so in order to feel, individually and collectively, finally, in the *here and now*. One does so to restrict the space that separates us from each other and to increase the distance from that which we perceive as hostile. It is this search for immanence in oneself and in others that naturally leads us to consider how experiences of revolution and love are so similar that they communicate with one another.

Taking a close look at the situation, it seems as if the desire to cancel out the experience of communism over the last decades may have proceeded, step by step, with the desire to cancel out the experience of love. Just as communism has been replaced by an infinite, inconclusive negotiation over rights, so too love has become a contractual affair, an engagement to barter about as if it were any other aspect of existence. Love no longer even has any experience of the end: one is fired, perhaps with an SMS, and if it’s worth the trouble you can put it on your CV.

One reason for the analogy between the two might lie in the fact that both communism and love have the same relation to time: they struggle against the present, against dominant reality, and their possibility of becoming always stands in relation to the impossibility of the present moment. Both share the desire to suspend history, both establish a state of exception, both want to shoot the clocks, for both every moment is decisive. Communism and love, finally, are connected through a desire to share intensity in

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ROMA 1977. Ragazza e carabinieri.

TANO D'AMICO

Tano D'Amico, *Uno sguardo (Ragazza e carabinieri)*, 1977. Photograph featured in the book *Tano D'amico: Di cosa sono fatti i ricordi* (Roma: Postcart, 2011).
Courtesy of the artist.



Portrait of Marcello Tari, date unknown.

more ways than one. Therefore, given that one no longer knows what a revolution might be, one does not yet know what love might be. And conversely, the more we understand one, the more we will be able to understand the other.

That the Ego loves an Other, that one can experience love, simply reveals the insufficiency of the Ego to undergo any experience at all, and, on the other hand, reveals the happiness of the pure experience of sharing. This is why affective experience destitutes *both* the Ego and the Other, revealing their names to be entirely inadequate. Love, as Gilbert Simondon says, is maximally *disindividuating*, because not only is “the affective problematic ... the experience in which a being feels that they are not an individual” but is also that experience which “suspends the functional modality of the relation to others and in which another subject – destituted from its social function – appears to us as more than individuality.”² I destitute the Other while they do the same to me, and within this “immobile movement” there is a common experience of the world. Frequently one discovers this *afterward*: in the experience of suffering at the end of love, all at once we know that the pain comes from the break of this being-with that implies a multitude of other creatures, objects, narratives, sounds, and images that make up the contained world that love constitutes. Such a form of love lives, in its turn, within a “transindividual” constellation, for which reason it has an antisocial calling but not an antipolitical one. The pain comes from this, and not from an offense against the Ego. Indeed, on this occasion, the Ego appears to be not only artificial but even an obstacle in explicating that world. We feel this intuitively when we recognize the lability of the borders of the Ego within the experience of love; it is bound by an epidermis that dies and regenerates every day and night. It is a joyful experience. Love appears in the place where the Ego disappears, and in turn, it disappears when the Ego becomes once more. There are two who remain in love but, making a singular use of the self via this affect, they are no longer *themselves*. In unlove, the *self* returns to occupy its ancient location. Love can be a destituent potential because it belongs among those rare experiences through which we naturally access a different and free use of the self and life itself, something we can either abandon ourselves to or not. But it is not a choice; it is a decision.

Gershom Scholem, writing about Benjamin in his book on the story of their friendship, looked with irony upon something about his friend that he could not understand, which Benjamin repeated to him frequently and

stubbornly. It is a misunderstanding that seems to fit with the Kabbalist’s profound incomprehension of Benjamin’s version of communism: “there is no unhappy love,” Benjamin implored.³ Scholem held that such a conviction was contradicted by his friend’s stormy love life, a thesis not only unconvincing due to the poverty of its argument, but because it reveals a total misunderstanding of what Benjamin meant by happiness.

One might say, on the contrary, that there are unhappy *individuals*. Because, despite employing all the strength we are capable of, we have not been able to avoid the return of the liberal individual; one cannot access the experience of love because one fails to depose the Ego. Or further still, because the individual loses itself in an injunction on thinking of happiness as something that one either does or does not possess, like any other object, thus dooming it to failure right from the start. Or, again, through imagining happiness as something that one completes or brings to a conclusion in the future, trivially summarized today when someone says: “I have a thing going on with them.” Love, like other oases, can be a refuge for the individual, but it can all too easily be confused with the desert if it becomes individualism in itself; that is, if love is content to be merely the sharing of a second-rate narcissism.

Nevertheless, when it materializes against all odds, precisely inasmuch as it appears in the world as a form of shared happiness and is therefore not appropriable, love is able to cut across even the most disastrous failures without losing an iota of its potential. It is as destructive as it is creative. It is both poor and powerful, present even in its absence, like the revolution. It can enter into life in any moment, like the Messiah. Love remains a happy experience even in abandonment and the most impervious of difficulties. It can overturn every kind of obstacle that it faces, by making use of a primitive violence. Anyone who has loved knows this all too well. Love is continually traversed by a line of extreme intensity, which makes it an exquisitely political affect. Claiming that there is no unhappy love means taking a position against one of the strongest and longlasting myths of Western civilization: that of unhappy love, of the *guilt* and *destiny* of suffering to which humanity is condemned.

One day in 1983, during a lesson in his course on cinema, Gilles Deleuze discussed Nietzsche and his conception of love, truth, and the potential of perception. At a certain point, he said, even during a doomed love affair we can find joy, if the experience has allowed us to

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perceive something we previously did not have access to. Love is one of the possibilities – the most powerful one – that increases the potential of existence, precisely because it allows us to perceive dimensions of existence that we previously could not, and thus, to destitute the superstitions we were subjected to, such as those represented by destiny or by an inextinguishable debt. Conversely, the inability to make love last exposes us to the diminution of that potential.

Deleuze feels it important to clarify that neither he nor Nietzsche are partisans of existential liberalism or what today we call “polyamory.” They are not telling us to gather the largest possible collection of amorous relationships, but that “the more you love someone, the more you increase your potential to exist and the more you become capable of perceiving things, according to the needs of a different nature.”⁴ In other words, one perceives things, the same things as before, but in a different way. Here we always have a slight shift in the axes; the axes of how life is lived this time around, its actual becoming. The definition of potential here is exactly that given by Deleuze: it does not consist in the relation, as such, but in affect, together with perception. Love is how we become aware of what it means to pass from one phase of life to another, from one intensity to another, more powerful one – and for this very reason, even a defeated, failed love, a love gone wrong, is nevertheless still an experience of happiness, so long as it witnesses this growth in potential. Given that perception through an affect means having a perspective on time and within time, Benjamin maintains that happiness has no need or desire for the future, but is entirely absorbed in the epoch in which we are living: “Happiness for us is thinkable only in the air that we have breathed, among the people who have lived with us. In other words, there vibrates in the idea of happiness (this is what that noteworthy circumstance teaches us) the idea of salvation.”⁵ This is the only sentimental education appropriate for revolutionary becoming, i.e., in which love can be defeated, but precisely because of our inability to face it, remains irreducible as an experience of happiness if we are able to redeem it in remembrance. That the being one loves *exists*, desire itself might be *now*, and one has an infinite potential to *remember* it represents the melancholically joyful fact that changes our perception of the world, even if that being might be distant or even lost forever.⁶ Its fulfillment is not a matter of history. This is why Heloise, in responding to her now distant, lost lover Abelard, always maintains that she prefers to *remember* and thus continue to love him against every

prohibition of his philosophy or their social morality. This is love against history. Everything that is true for lovers counts as well for the commune, for a people yet to arrive, a revolutionary class, because if it is true “I am not centered in myself,”⁷ then in the center, between the *I* that deposes the Ego and the *we* that is me, we find the self that experiences the world with *the other*. Only those who have experienced love can access communism immediately. And, logically, the more we know how to love someone, the greater the possibility of communism’s arrival.

Capitalist happiness is entirely projected into the future; all that is allowed to us in the present is to live its abstraction collectively, reified in the commodity that we ourselves become: measured, valorized, indebted lovers. Everyone knows in this world love is exchanged with things and can be consumed without end. This is a form of happiness that does not give us access to any true experience, one that instead of increasing perception tangibly diminishes it. It is a state of being that lives through the absence of the past, of feeling, of truth, and thus of redemption. Is there such a thing as capitalist love? This is not an easy question, but what is certain is that there is a liberal version of love that affects every place and existence, just as every flow of capital does. It defines itself through a lack of sensitivity, through being opportunist and calculating, deprived of its own language. It is where the body is usually an exchange value, a currency of flesh, in which the good of the Ego functions as the treasurer and absolute legislator (I must put *my* well-being above all else) of unhappiness, which, sooner or later, returns fatally from whence it came, condemning the Ego to an existence deprived of truth, and thus of love. It is the ultimate unhappiness.

It is clear, as Foucault taught us, that it is not sex, i.e., “sexuality” as such, which can tell us anything about “the truth of the self and of love.” What saves us is the fact that, through this affect, we are able to tolerate such intensity on every level of life, to exercise the ability to perceive that at least for one day we have seen through the eyes of another, and even the infinite ability to live happiness through fragments, beyond the present, beyond abandonment, beyond the pain of existence. And perhaps its secret is what, in his essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” Benjamin calls “the unexpressed,” which is defined as a halt in appearances that allows the truth to emerge. Perhaps in that which remains unexperienced of a love – and for love that lasts a lifetime, maybe this is even the most true – dwells its deepest truth.

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“You’re the revolution,” said the lover’s lover one day. On second thought, it was not a statement but a question. As always, the reply – if one is necessary – is to be found in life itself.

Spirituality and Combat: A Conversation with Marcello Tari

This spring Italian philosopher Marcello Tari, a self-described “barefoot researcher,” published his first book in English, *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution*. The book provides a theory of revolution, beginning with the ethics of experience and the encounter. Tari analyzes the commune as a space of both truth and redemption, and frankly discusses the contradictions involved in sovereignty, self-organization, and collectivity. Responding to Giorgio Agamben’s *The Use of Bodies* and *The Invisible Committee*’s *To Our Friends*, Tari uses writers such as Kafka, Brecht, Pasolini, and David Bowie to think through the meaning of ungovernability in a time of civilizational collapse. What follows is his first interview in English, where we discuss the new book, and the tools needed for revolutionary overcoming.

– Matt Peterson

Matt Peterson: There’s a great quote in the second chapter, “The World or Nothing at All,” where you write, “For revolutionaries the problem has always been that of creating a collision between a politics against history and a communism stronger than modernity.” Elsewhere, you write that revolution is not a question of overcoming a state, but the whole Western metaphysics of governance, of its subjectivization, depoliticization, rhythms of life, etc. How do you come to terms with just how hostile a terrain we seem to be dealing with at the present, and the reality of contemporary consciousness and spirit we’re faced with in this overcoming?

Marcello Tari: I think this is the main and essential question of destitution and destituent power. If we do not get out of the paradigm of Western metaphysics, which comes from ancient Greek philosophy and politics – the *polis*, democracy, the individual, the very concept of life – it seems very difficult to subvert the present. This also means not only coming to terms with old revolutionary traditions, Marxism, anarchism, whatever, but also with the thought that is more contemporary to us, on which we have relied for a long time: Foucault, Deleuze, and all that has followed until today, because they remain within those traditions. It is not by chance that many have set out to find alternatives – Tiqqun takes up the Jewish Kabbalah, others take up knowledge from from the Far East or the Andean mountains. After all,

Christianity, which I think has something very meaningful for the gesture of destitution, also comes from the East. This research of recent years is a striking symptom of dissatisfaction with available tools. The very idea of destitution stems from an obvious difficulty, that this way of thinking about revolution was insufficient, lacking, destined not to be realized except in its nemesis. The problem seems to me that every time we cover every idea, every practice, with its Western meaning and concept, and “destituent power” itself runs this risk, so we should maybe deconceptualize it. Less philosophy, more spirituality; less chatter, more experiences; less willpower, more listening. So, “love, and do what you will.”

Now, it is certain that we cannot suddenly get rid of millennia of history and culture, but being aware of it is the first step. The second step that I propose, and this is not very well understood, is that if we do not pass through a destitution of our Ego, of how our subjectivity is constructed, with its passions, selfishness, greediness, it is not credible to think of subverting any other external power. Reality, which you reference, is not *the* reality. To quote an author I do not like, it is just “capitalist realism.” In order to have access to a different reality, which means looking at and living things differently, with a new heart, we have to dismiss the way we have been living. This is what I refer to as the destitution of the worldly form of life. And I think that we can do it individually and collectively, in solitude and in common.

MP: In many ways, the book is an account and response to the last twenty years of radical politics and theory, and an elaboration on the ideas of Mario Tronti, Giorgio Agamben, and the Invisible Committee. In thinking through the polemics these authors and groups have proposed, I wonder whether the question of revolution is one of winning these debates, or do they instead demonstrate the need for a broader spiritual shift, transformation, or “awakening,” as we’ve often had it in our American religious context. You speak in the last chapter, “The Destituent Insurrection,” of the recurrent leftist complaint, “Now is not the moment, we need to wait for the ‘objective conditions’ to mature. The people won’t understand,” but I’m wondering what can be said of *subjective conditions*? Marxism has its secular, rational, materialist theory of consciousness, but seems unable to access the spiritual depths of belief, devotion, and faith that feel necessary for revolution.

MT: *Spirituality and combat* is the theme around which Mario Tronti and I have begun to work this past year, so this is a good question for me. I will begin by paraphrasing Marx who says “the existential and spiritual condition

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determines consciousness.” The original Marxian sentence was about the “social condition” – I think this is not enough, because it leads to the thinking that if I change the external conditions, i.e., economic and political structures, then everything will be better. Reason and the heart are separated. This is why classical Marxist revolutions, in Russia and elsewhere, were all defeated. Today, capitalism colonizes our souls, and subjectivity is a commodity like any other. “To live” is a battlefield.

Do you remember the Tiqqun text, “How Is It to Be Done?,” which is to ask ultimately: “how to live?” This is the central question, the How and not the What – the When depends on the How. Heidegger discussed this in his early course on the phenomenology of religious life. Referring to St. Paul’s proclamation, Heidegger said that the Christian How concerns the self-conduct in factual life, because, “The opposition of faith and law is decisive: the *how* of faith and of the fulfillment of the law, *how* I comport myself to the faith and also to the law.”

The How is a praxis, an existential praxis founded on a belief. This How is also and fundamentally connected to the *parousia*, to the messianic promise of a total liberation: it’s How you behave now that achieves eschatological fulfillment. Not “wait and see”! *Now* you must know *how* to live in the kingdom and let it grow in this world. This primitive Christian way of life is a total disavowal of the typical forms of leftism that you recall. We can also think of Benjamin’s image of the messianic *now-time*: “For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter.” As Tronti said, you must always be ready, to be organized for this moment, that is: you must have a way of life able to do this. And this way is the How which proceeds by faith.

Faith wants a *metánoia*, a conversion, which means a radical change in the way of thinking and living that takes you *beyond* (*metá*). Conversion today means also a critique of civilization, not just a social critique. A critique that includes my Ego as a producer and not only a product of this civilization. Simone Weil wrote in *Gravity and Grace*, “The reality of the world is the result of our attachment.” So that’s why poverty, as I write in the first pages of the book, is the form of our freedom, to go beyond ourselves.

Finally, Heidegger said that the Pauline How is a *relation*, a communal relation to the self, to others, to the world, and then to time itself. This leads one to think that the communion of the spirits came first. The communism of goods is a *consequence* of a communism of the spirit. Spirit burns in the things that you make, in how you receive, in how you share, in how you speak, and

in how you love. It burns all attachments. You can see this clearly in the *Acts of the Apostles* when, after receiving and sharing the Spirit, their community has a way of life that became a model for all coming communal forms of life and insurrections of the poor: “All the believers were together and had everything in common ... The multitude of believers was one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they owned.” *Omnia sunt communia*. The question of When is almost meaningless in this perspective, “the time is coming – indeed it’s here now” (John 4:23). From what I can see, you and your friends at Woodbine are now full of this kind of a burning spirit.

But we must pay attention to the right sequence, because without a strong spirituality, as many of us have experienced, individual passions soon take over and everything ends in resentment. The best assumptions turn into their opposite. This would be an interesting couple of questions to ask many comrades and friends: are you a believer? What do you believe in? The community you live in, does it have a spirit? And if it does, how does it act?

MP: In the Preamble you write, “Revolutionaries are activists of end-times” and you speak of “a communism of the end,” which resonates with Sabu Kohso’s recent book *Radiation and Revolution*. Later on you say, “unfortunately, we Westerners, unlike the Zapatistas or other Indigenous peoples, do not have any Mayan tradition at our disposal, no ancestral knowledge, not even a liberation theology to serve as the living fabric of revolution. All we have is the possibility to learn how to use the field of ruins – of tradition, knowledge, and theology – that characterizes the landscape of our completed modernity.” And later in “No Future for Us,” you continue, “Communism is not another world, but another use of this world.” So it seems the task for all of us shipwrecked in the Western metropole is to now live in and make use of the ruins we’ve inherited, which becomes an infrastructural and metaphysical question. Following both you and Sabu, to think of revolution and communism today means to face the question of our shared ruins both technically and existentially.

MT: Exactly. First, to have another use of the world, you must change your heart, and I say heart and not intellect. In the sense of the heart in ancient Jewish theology, unlike Hellenistic ones, where it is the place of reason and love together. The heart prevents cynicism and calculation. This kind of change, I think, could give us a different vision of the ruins: to discern the things that deserve to be forgotten or destroyed, and others that call for our

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compassion and love. The great problem is: how to share things both technically and existentially? How to not separate the heart and reason? I don't agree with the idea that "revolution is just a technical question," but on the other hand, to think that it can only consist of an inner phenomenon is a dangerous illusion.

I think it's useful to put a distinction between technique and technology. If technique is something appropriable, technology brings a huge number of problems. It is nihilistic at its core, including, among other things, its inhuman speed. In the book I make much use of Heiner Müller's work, the German playwright. He insists on "the potential of slowing down." I think this is what we have to learn, how to impress slowness in the midst of a hostile territory like the metropolis. I believe that our relationships would be better and more beautiful in that scenario.

Then, the end-times and communism of the end. I find that the way in which the Apocalypse is represented today is a big lie, a form of subalternity to this world based on fear. The true Revelation is something good, because it says that this world ends. And in this sense, I write that revolutionaries are militants of the end-times, His "assistants." The communism of the end is the Good News. Pessimism for the current times, infinite hope for their ends. Come on friends, *sursum corda!* We will overcome this world!

x

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Marcello Tari is a "barefoot" researcher of contemporary struggles and movements. He is author of numerous essays and books in French and Italian, including *Il ghiaccio era sottile: Per una storia dell'autonomia* (Derive Approdi, 2012), *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice: Il comunismo della destituzione* (Derive Approdi, 2017), and *Autonomie!: Italie, les années 1970* (La Fabrique, 2011). Tari lives in between France and Italy. *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution* (Common Notions, 2021) is his first book in English.

Matt Peterson is an organizer at Woodbine, an experimental space in New York City. He directed the documentary features *Scenes from a Revolt Sustained* (2014) and *Spaces of Exception* (2018).

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